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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a live production of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" (in full costume but with no sets) for all public middle school and high school students in Harrisonburg and Rockingham, Virginia. The paper states that the "Character Counts" issues that are covered in the play are: decision making, responsibility and citizenship, trustworthiness, fairness, respect, and caring. It provides pre-performance notes on violence in Shakespeare's day, noting that "Macbeth" is a very violent play, and that Shakespeare used his plays to show audiences how violence only breeds more violence. (NKA)

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Shakespeare Live! And Character Counts

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Shakespeare Live! and Character Counts

By Cathy A. Brookshire

Virginia Standards of Learning for 6-12 are listed below with student activities related to observation of live theatre performances of Shakespearean plays as performed by the High School theatre touring company Shakespeare Live! The plays are edited versions of the full texts (running approximately 75 min.) and are performed in seventeenth century English. The company uses costuming, sometimes period, sometimes contemporaneous. No sets are used for any of the productions although acting boxes and set pieces are.

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SHAKESPEARE LIVE!
AND
CHARACTER COUNTS
by
Cathy A. Brookshire

Shakespeare Live will present a 65 min. production of *Macbeth* this fall and winter to all the public high and middle schools in Harrisonburg and Rockingham. The production is performed in seventeenth century English, in full costume. No sets are used. 4000 students will see the production.

This production is funded by Rockingham and Harrisonburg public schools.

Character Counts issues that are covered in this play are:

Decision making:

Macbeth makes numerous poorly thought out decisions based on inadequate information (from untrustworthy sources) and on his overwhelming desire to be in power as well as peer pressure. The results of his choices are disastrous for his country, himself, and his wife. He suffers enormous guilt over the deaths he causes, the loss of his friends, and the death of his wife. He sees his beloved country in ruins. He is fully aware of his mistakes by the end of the play and regrets choosing the path that he did. He dies for his mistakes.

Responsibility & Citizenship:

Macbeth as leader of Scotland is responsible for the well being of his country. He squanders the respect of his people by becoming a murdering tyrant. He serves his country badly by brutalizing his people and bringing on a civil war.

Malcolm, Macduff and others fight Macbeth in order to stop the senseless killing and brutalization of their people and the further deterioration of their country.

Teachers can point out to their students that the actors are students who have spent many hours of study and practice on this play in order to provide audiences with a high quality production. Actors give up other after school activities, study time, and social time to work on the production - even during the summer as they rehearse for 8 days, 8 hours a day in August. Rehearsals continue well into September. They see their work as a way of serving their community.

It should be pointed out that actors are expected to perform even when they are ill or have an exam. Actors are expected to show up on time and ready to rehearse/perform with all lines memorized regardless of personal problems. The schoolwork they miss must be made up on their own time even if it means (and it often does) that the actors must work on additional school work before and after school hours. Actors are also expected to maintain their academic standing during the touring season and are removed from the company if they do not.

Trustworthiness:

Macbeth betrays the trust of his king; he kills Duncan while Duncan is sleeping in his house. He also betrays the trust of his people; he leads them into a civil war, he spies on them, he does nothing to see that the country is run wisely or well. He betrays the trust of his best friend Banquo and has him killed, when his wife becomes mentally ill, he ignores her and leaves her to die alone. Teachers may point out to students that this is morally wrong as well as being stupid. Macbeth loses all he holds dear because in the end no one trusts him.

Fairness:

In no way does Macbeth "play by the rules." He makes them up as he goes along. Look at the mess this attitude of his causes.

Respect:

Teachers can use the experience to point out to students the need to show respect for the actors as well as other audience members by behaving appropriately during the performance.

Caring:

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth care for no one but themselves. Nothing they do is for anyone's benefit but their own. As a result, they have no friends, no one they can trust, no one who cares about them.

PRE PERFORMANCE NOTES - VIOLENCE

Macbeth was very much the Matrix of its day. Cool special effects were used for the witches (smoke, trap doors through which the witches disappeared and appeared, realistic incantations and spells) and the combat was spectacular. Just as modern combat in today's movies and t.v shows reflect the things we know about fighting from all over the world; the martial arts, Tai Chi, capioera (pronounced cap - oh - era), wrestling, etc., as well as the special effects we can now use to enhance fights (Star Wars light sabers, the Matrix moves) so combat in Shakespeare's plays reflected the type of weapons and styles of fighting familiar to the audiences of England during the Elizabethan & Jacobean eras. Shakespeare showed his audiences fighting styles and weapons from Germany, France, and Italy as well as the English sword play his audiences were used to seeing on the streets of London. Weapons of choice were rapiers (thin bladed swords), daggers, axes, staves, quarter staffs, and broad swords. London was a violent place where fights occurred daily on the streets. *Macbeth* reflects the time and place in which it was written. It is an extremely violent play. Innocent women and children die as well as hardened soldiers. While Shakespeare certainly used the violence to attract an audience (just as our R rated movies do today) he also used his plays to show audiences how violence only breeds more violence. In *Macbeth* as in all his tragedies, the villain comes to a very bad end and suffers terribly for having made others suffer.

Today we also face numerous examples of senseless violence on our streets, in our schools, and in our homes. This production presents a portrait of us as we might be if we allow ourselves to become like Macbeth.

Don't give in to peer pressure to do something you know is wrong.

Don't allow your own interests to become so important that other people suffer so that you can get what you want.

Don't blame others for your actions.

You are responsible for what you do!

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